Imprisonment In Russia

My Testimony

By Anatoly Marchenko. Translated by Michael Scammel. 415 pp. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. $8.95.

By HARRISON E. SALISBURY

It is, perhaps, not quite fair to criticize a book for not being something the author was incapable of making it, and yet I put down Anatoly Marchenko's story of life in today's Soviet concentration camps with a feeling of irritation and dissatisfaction.

The fault may not be his entirely. It may rest, in part, on his translator, in part, on the introduction by Max Hayward and, in part, on the publicity of his publishers, all of them conspiring in a rather thoughtless way to introduce Marchenko as a kind of Solzhenitsyn or at least a new Eugenia Ginzburg or Lydia Chukovskaya. It doesn't wash. Marchenko is, in fact, a rather simple young man who fell into the clutches of the Soviet police after a work-barracks brawl in the provinces and later compounded his offense by foolishly trying to flee the Soviet Union over the border into Persia—a stunt which only a thoroughly naive or amazingly reckless individual would think of attempting. He was caught and charged, quite ridiculously, with treason, convicted arbitrarily and given a six-year sentence in the post-Stalin concentration camps.

"My Testimony" is his melodramatic account of his imprisonment. It is badly written, splotched with purple rhetoric (his or the translator's ?), oozes with self-pity and tries quite vainly to equate Marchenko's experiences with the blinding terror of Stalin's days. All Marchenko succeeds in doing is to bore us. It's a pity because he has some straight and sinister facts to relate. The concentration camp is not dead in Russia. True, the system has been curtailed. The ordinary Soviet citizen no longer sits behind his locked apartment door at night listening to the tramp of the Secret Police as they go from flat to flat making their arrests. The enormous complex of police industrial and mining enterprises in eastern Siberia has been turned over for the most part to ordinary civilian direction.

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But the system survives. And, increasingly, a new if trickling flow of citizens is being fed into the prisons—writers, students, angry protesters, dissidents, a different kind of victim than Stalin chose. Stalin's police arrested whole nations, whole continents of people (*all* the middle-peasants of the Ukraine, *all* the citizens of the Chuchen republic, *all* the Tartars of the Crimea, etc.)

The police of Brezhnev and Kosygin are highly selective. They arrest only those few individuals in the Soviet population who are brave enough and alert enough actively to challenge the status quo. These numbers now are small. But, on the evidence of Marchenko's book, if the number of dissidents grows and is followed by equivalent increases in arrests there will be no problem in accommodating them in the camps and in rapidly expanding the camps once again. The base is still there. The system has changed only quantitatively. Qualitatively, a Soviet concentration camp offers the same characteristics it did in Stalin's time, just as Stalin's camps bore a strong familial resemblance to the Czar's old prisons (but vastly expanded, more sadistic, more brutal, more callous).

This is the point of Marchenko's book and it is one well worth making. The pity of it is that he does not simply tell his story and let it go at that.

There is an ironic footnote to Marchenko's story. He is back in a Soviet prison again — this time as a real political prisoner. After he was released from serving his six-year "treason" term in 1966, he moved to a Moscow suburb and wrote his account of contemporary camp life. He had been genuinely politicized by his experiences. Unable to publish his book in the Soviet Union he wrote open letters to Soviet authorities and Soviet writers.

Then, in the summer of 1968 he wrote another letter of protest — against the Soviet repressions in Czechoslovakia. The police promptly sent him back to prison for a year in a "strict regime" camp on a charge of violating residence regulations. His case was protested by the courageous little group of Moscow dissidents—Larissa Daniel, Pavel Litvinov and General Grigorenko. Now all these, too, are in the hands of the police. Marchenko's story is badly told. But it bears thinking about. ■

P - Marchenko, Anatoly
P - Salisbury, Harrison
Soc. 401.2 My Testimony